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2014

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Jon Young

Michael W. Firmin

*Cedarville University*, [firmin@cedarville.edu](mailto:firmin@cedarville.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Young, Jon and Firmin, Michael W., "Qualitative Perspectives Toward Relational Connection in Pastoral Ministry" (2014). *Psychology Faculty Publications*. 187.

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## Qualitative Perspectives toward Relational Connection in Pastoral Ministry

Jonathan W. Young and Michael W. Firmin  
 Cedarville University, Cedarville, Ohio, USA

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*We present the results of a phenomenological, qualitative research study in which 13 Southern Baptist (SB) pastors were administered in-depth interviews. The sample was selected from a total of 37 exemplars, identified in the quantitative component of a larger mixed-methods study, regarding the pastors' perspectives toward relational connection in pastoral ministry. Three themes emerged from the data regarding relational connection in pastoral ministry. First, pastors indicated the need to be intentional about pastoral connection. Second, the pastors stressed the importance of being available to congregants who specifically desire pastoral connection. Finally, the participants related that pastors should give particular attention to connections with lay church leaders. Keywords: Humor, Sense of Humor, Leadership, Pastoral Leadership, Leadership Style, Longevity, Leader-Follower Distance, Relational Transparency, Relational Nearness*

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Successful pastoral ministry, like much leadership in general societal sectors, must be based on relational strengths rather than a reliance on executive power (Edwards, 2011). In the business realm, executive-power leadership often is built on dynamics such as financial successes, human relations prowess, educational credentials, and/or political connections. Relational leadership generates influence from capital that is built on personal trust (Carmeli, Tishler, & Edmondson, 2011). Pastoral leadership also involves these elements, but additional human factors play a role, such as personal integrity and interpersonal skills (Wong, 2011). Consequently, the stock and trade of pastoral leaders involves more than leadership that produces a measurable bottom-line. Puls (2011) argues that, in ministry contexts, *trust* relationships with congregants and church leaders also plays an important role.

In the present study, we explore the relational aspect of pastoral leadership. The research literature suggests that successful leadership involves more than merely managing others (DuBrin, 2013). Certainly, there is an element of directing people in order to accomplish tasks and objectives. There are foundational skills necessary that, if lacking, any successful leadership is impossible. Skill sets such as organization, delegation, supervision, exhortation, and vision are requisite for leadership exercised at any level and in most contexts (Northouse, 2013). Notwithstanding, pastoral leadership involves some elements that are not necessarily identical to other leadership contexts. This is due to some factors that, in combination, make pastoral leadership somewhat different from other forms of more generic leadership (Rorher, 2012). Although the list is not intended to be exhaustive, we relate six here since they help to set up the literature review's foundation for the present study of ministry relational connection within the larger framework of pastoral leadership.

First, pastoral leadership is exercised by clergy in the context of a volunteer base and, as such, church members are not paid employees of the organization (Figert, 2012). Obviously, some multiple-staffed churches have employees, such as associate pastors, administrative assistants, business personnel, maintenance workers, and the like—depending on the church's size, and significant variability exists among churches in this regard. But, in all cases, the congregation at large is comprised of people who freely choose to join the church and they are

equally free to leave it at any time. This fluid nature of congregants has the potential for making the exercise of pastoral leadership challenging in many respects (Cohall & Cooper, 2010).

Second, pastors typically do not possess the same level of control over those whom they lead (Jaworski, 2012). For example, in business or academic contexts, CEOs can hire replacements or fire individuals they believe no longer are best contributing to the greater cause. There is a level of control that these leaders possess by virtue of employment desirability within the organization. A clear line and staff organization structure typically exists where the CEO exercises authority and subordinates are expected to obey and follow orders. This authoritative arrangement is far less clear in pastoral ministry settings (Christine, 2010).

Third, pastors are dependent on the congregants whom they lead for financial sustenance (Mundrey, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). Although some denominations may pay pastors through an episcopal or other central-headquarter formats, at some level, individual local churches are still dependent on weekly offerings for continued financial viability. As such, churches are generally expected to be financially self-sustaining. Within this context and, unlike business leaders, the pastor is not selling a tangible “product” that grosses profits which will develop the corporation’s base and advance it to new levels. Rather, pastors are dependent on the good will of those whom they lead in order to maintain regular cash flow and to meet weekly financial needs (James & Jones, 2010).

Fourth, pastors lead in contexts where followers “vote.” Sometimes this phenomenon involves formal counting-of-ballots, such as congregational meetings. In other instances, congregants will “vote with their feet,” meaning that they will leave the church if they are unhappy with the pastoral ministry. In yet other situations, congregants may choose to vote with their pocketbooks. That is, they may remain in the church but exercise power by giving or refusing to give toward specific projects or toward weekly ministry needs. Regardless of the particular means, pastors possess an added leadership dynamic that is unique from other types of leaders, since the congregants whom they lead cast tangible and tacit votes on regular bases (Earley, 2012).

Fifth, pastoral ministry leadership involves a distinctive of being a not-for-profit entity. The research literature is replete in delineating various differences between for-profit and non-profit organizations—including various implications for those leading the respective organizations (e.g., Sarros, Cooper, & Santora, 2011). Whitney and Dalton (2008) note that some M.B.A. and other master’s degree programs offer specializations in preparing leaders for each sector since the differences are considered to be relatively pronounced. Educators and organizational boards recognize that leading agencies or other entities with diverse capitalistic/non-capitalistic/profit/non-profit objectives has substantial implications for how leadership will be exercised in either context (De Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, & Jegers, 2011) and this principle is certainly true for local church pastors.

Sixth, pastoral leadership possesses a unique dynamic of spirituality. Churches vary significantly along a spectrum of fundamentalist to liberal regarding what spirituality means and how it manifests itself in respective local congregations. Nonetheless, the point is made here that all churches to some degree possess a spiritual element that contributes a distinctive dynamic to pastoral and ministry leadership (Weaver, 2012). Implications include moral expectations for pastors and congregants, potential consequences for moral violations, commitments to ascribed theological positions, desires for attaining aesthetic or divine qualities, and expectations of servant-leadership in some church contexts. The general argument is that pastoral ministry involves leadership toward objectives that are often intangible, immeasurable, and highly personal to respective individuals within a congregation (Fowler, 2012).

Non-church organizations possess each of these elements and leaders often engage with each noted element at varying levels. It is seemingly the mixture of these and other components that provide some unique potential challenges in pastoral ministry (Taylor, 2011). Further, since every congregation is different, Spencer, Winston, and Bocarnea (2012) note that various pastors potentially may be successful leaders in some churches and yet, exercising the same general qualities, may be unsuccessful in other church contexts. Nonetheless, there likely are central kernels that are common to all pastoral leadership—irrespective of congregation (Burt, 2009). It is beyond the scope of the present study to appraise all elements of pastoral leadership. Rather, we are focusing on only one component in the present research study, within the larger framework of effective pastoral leadership. In particular, we are interested in knowing more about how local church pastors view the construct of relational connection in the context of pastoral ministry. Operationally, we define this concept in terms of the perceived level of desire for personal involvement that pastors show toward their respective congregants. Although we are unaware of any other authors who use these precise words in order to define relational connection, it is consistent with concepts by Sundberg (2012). In sum, our research question involves better understanding how pastors frame their understanding of relational connection with congregants in the context of exercising successful pastoral leadership.

The larger context of the present study was a mixed-methods investigation regarding qualities that Baptist pastors perceived as being requisite for successful pastoral ministry. We administered a survey that provided some breadth of understanding regarding the pastors' perceptions. A follow-up study involving interviews enabled us to further explore pastoral perceptions in more rich ways and to greater depths than did the survey data alone. In the qualitative component, which we relate in the present article. We generated a phenomenological (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), qualitative research study. This paradigm is used when researchers desire to better understand a construct from the viewpoints of those who experience it (Creswell, 2012). In the present context, we desired to better comprehend how pastors come to understand the nature of relational connection and how its role intersects with the leadership aspect of pastoral ministry. Since our research objective was to obtain data that would provide thick descriptions (Sergi & Hallin, 2011) toward answering the research question, we decided to use in-depth interviews as the prime research technique. Surveys were also administered as part of the overall mixed-method nature of the study that entailed other elements outside of ministry relational connection. But the specific, singular construct we studied here reports the results of the qualitative data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

The context of the article's first author is that of a Baptist pastor serving in a medium-sized church located in the Midwest United States. The data collection for the present study was part of his Ed.D. dissertation at a Southern Baptist seminary and his intent in generating the study was to improve his own pastoral ministry as well as contribute the larger empirical literature relating to pastoral success. The second author was involved with the study in the context of a qualitative methods expert. He edits a qualitative research journal and directs a prominent, national qualitative research conference. The second author particularly brought to the study technical expertise, analysis, and writing ability as salient contributions to generating the present article.

## **Method**

### **Population**

The present article reports the qualitative findings from a mixed-methods research study regarding interpersonal relationships in pastoral ministry. Approval for the study was obtained

by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the seminary where the article's first author was a student at the time of data collection. We administered a questionnaire to 530 Southern Baptist pastors who were serving in pastoral ministry roles at the time of data collection, chosen randomly from the pool of 44,000 SBC churches in America. A variety of relationships were shown to exist between self-enhancing responses and career ministry tenure. Consideration was given to size of the subjects' church and number of individuals serving on staff. Here, we report the results of the qualitative component to the study. Two hundred and eighty three (53% of questionnaire respondents) indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up qualitative study. Thirty-seven exemplars were identified from the data and subsequently asked to participate in the final interview component of the study. The study was completed with 13 pastors who provided in-depth qualitative interviews by telephone. Consistent with the SBC convention policies at the time of data collection, all of the pastors interviewed were male. The average length in ministry was 21 years with an average tenure in their present church being 6.5 years. Each of the pastors interviewed in the study were Caucasian. Individuals from other ethnicities and racial groups participated in the surveys, but each of the 13 individuals who volunteered for interviews were Caucasian.

## **Procedure**

Pastors selected to participate in the qualitative follow-up interview procedure were contacted first by email and then by phone for the interview. The interview sought to help provide corroboration of the lead pastor's quantitative self-assessment data and to further probe how the leader's personality configuration style(s) have related to tenure and practical pastoral ministry. All interviews were recorded with permission and the names used in the present article for reading clarity are pseudonyms. All interviews were conducted via telephone and later transcribed for analysis. Semi-structured protocols (Kvale, 2007) were followed whereby we began with a set of prescribed constructs (e.g., availability, humor, affability, connection, leadership, relationships, and encouragement for other constructs) but allowed the participants to take the interviews where the participants felt they were best describing their sentiments. We believed this method best provided thick descriptions that would communicate the most cogent perspectives of the pastors (Fontana & Frey, 2003).

A constant-comparison model was used when analyzing the transcript data. That is, we used each transcript's content to provide a basis of sifting and searching for what appeared to be the most relevant codes in the transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Since we were unaware of any previously published research in this domain, we did not use axial coding strategies, such as importing codes into the analysis. Rather, we utilized a completely inductive strategy of assessing the data for repeating words, constructs, phrases, and ideas. Concept mapping was used at points compared the content of various participants and organized the interviews in meaningful ways. Following Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), the process of transitioning from codes to themes involved asking key questions, conducting organizational review, and visually displaying the findings. Saturation was achieved in the data sample. That is, by the end of the 13 interviews, there was no new data being related that seemingly would have generated novel themes that might be reported in the present paragraph (Silverman, 2006). As such, we considered the sample size to be adequate for the present purposes. Internal validity for the study was enhanced through a number of means, one of which was independent review (Maxwell, 2012). A qualitative researcher, who was not part of the data collection or formally connected with the study, reviewed the transcripts and compared them to the findings reported in the present article. This helped to lend validity to the conclusions drawn in the present article. Internal validity also was enhanced via member checking (Merriam, 2002). This is a process whereby we selected various participants in the study and provided them with the

results being reported in the present article. All were in essential agreement with the findings. And finally, internal validity also was enhanced through generating a data trail (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). This entailed taking the findings from the present study and showing the relationship between the reported results and the citation of participant quotations. This method helps to ensure that the reported findings are apt representations of the data provided by the participants.

## **Results**

Three results emerged from the data regarding relational connection in pastoral ministry. First, pastors indicated the need to be intentional about pastoral connection. All participants believed that it is essential for effective ministry. Second, the pastors stressed the importance of being available to congregants who specifically desire pastoral connection. Not all congregants possess the same levels of needs or desires for pastors to engage with them. For those to whom it is important—pastor should make specific efforts to reach out to these individuals. Finally, the participants related that pastors should give particular attention to connections with lay church leaders. In Baptist churches, this typically meant individuals such as deacons, Sunday school superintendents, music worship leaders, and other non-paid church staff.

### **Be Intentional About Pastoral Connectedness**

The pastors interviewed in the present research study resoundingly indicated that effective pastoral ministry requires intentionality regarding relational connection with congregants. The notion of a distant-pastor who is somehow apart from the daily worlds of church congregants is unattractive at best and a recipe for disaster at worst, according to the views expressed by the participants. In Andy's words, "Relating to people is important, they have to see you as a real person, and you have to speak to them in their real world."

The word picture of the local church pastor as a shepherd was used most frequently by the participants when discussing the need for intentional connection with congregants. Jesus called himself the good shepherd and pastors are expected to follow this model. The analogy dates back to biblical times when shepherds typically lived among their sheep, gave them individual attention when needed, and protected the flock from potential harm. Although the Bible uses other metaphors at times to describe a pastor, the participants in the present study consistently identified "shepherd" as the prevailing functional metaphor. Steve conveyed the sentiments of most on this point when he stated: "Relational nearness is essential. Pastoral ministry is a shepherding ministry, like the example in [the gospel of] John of the Good Shepherd."

From the perspective of the interviewed pastors, developing a meaningful relatedness with congregants is not a matter to be left to chance or that somehow haphazardly will occur. Rather, it is a dynamic that pastors need to identify, generate a plan, and cultivate. Evidently, this is not because pastors innately tend to be distant individuals. Rather, it is because they also are church leaders and, as such, the pastoral role comes with multiple ministry demands. If pastors are not intentional about how they develop connection with congregations, then they may find themselves in roles that are more distant than would be otherwise optimal for ministry success. Carl summarized the concept in the following manner: "A leader must know how to be in the right place at the right time—because you can't be everywhere at all times. I think, 'where should I be at this moment?'" The pastors related that there is no dichotomy between their roles as leaders, however, and their duty to provide relational connectedness with congregants. Rather, the two are integrated in the pastors' thinking. Effective leaders become

close to those in their church and this, in turn, enhances the effectiveness of their leadership. Scott illustrated the point succinctly:

I have to care about what I'm doing and who I'm serving. I think primarily about leadership—I'm pastoral, but I look at people through a leader lens. A leader is there, encourages, and challenges, and is responsible for the role of a leader. Accept that and you can never do enough for people, so just ask the Lord if you've done enough...that's what matters.

In sum, the pastors conveyed a feed-back system in which encouragement enhances leadership and perceived effective leadership provides future opportunities with congregants for additional encouragement. As such, connection and leadership seemingly feed one another.

While all the participants indicated that having an intentional plan for cultivating connectedness with congregants was essential, there was no single plan uniformly mentioned by the pastors. Two common sub-themes, however, were mentioned by most participants. The first was to be intentionally transparent. Sometimes this occurs in sermon delivery. Using personal, appropriate illustrations when delivering sermons was commonly noted. This is not to suggest, of course, that pastors solely rely on personal anecdotes for sermon illustrations. Rather, relating oneself to the congregation as a whole through personal examples, testimonies, and stories produces a connection among congregants that otherwise likely would not exist. Adam related the sentiments of most on this point when he discussed how preaching and connection should be related in pastoral ministry: "Relating to people is important, they have to see you as a real person, and you have to speak to them in their real world. You get to know your sheep, their likes and personalities. You can get close just by your preaching." Naturally, the adage of all things in moderation holds true to this point. That is, the pastors spoke of keeping a healthy balance on this point—not letting self-disclosure become overly dominant or using the pulpit as a means of personal story telling, to the neglect of the Word. Nonetheless, when utilized effectively, the pastors believe that Sunday sermons provide a cogent means of making congregants feel as if they relate to the Pastor. Consider David's comments:

The pulpit is the greatest point of contact with 600 people in a month. There no way I can have a relationship with 600, but if they see me from the pulpit—including the family in a fishbowl—then people develop a relationship.

The second sub-theme mentioned by the pastors regarding the development of intentional connection with congregants is to exercise due sensitivity. John stated the point by citing the expression "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." There was no formula or steps of actions that the pastors in the study related. Rather, they spoke of a disposition, or attitude, or outlook that pastors rightly should possess. It involves internally being attuned with what generally is going on and intruding at times into people lives. Charles related the pastors' sentiments about intentionality in this regard when he stated:

It's about a spiritual sensitivity. If you have nearness, you can begin to notice when something is amiss. When you read the signs, you can step in and minister to people. 'Is there something I can pray about?' A lot today is only skin deep ministries. We have to make conscious efforts to be near and with our people.

The pastors shared their overall sentiments that, like Charles, they must be alert to zeroing-in on congregant needs. A similar construct was noted in relationship to the biblical concept of

“love.” That is, pastors indicated that they needed to practically demonstrate love—in the sense of communicating a deep, abiding care and commitment to the needs of their congregants. Tony illustrated: “How can a man be a pastor unless he loves his people? He needs to know what is going on in their lives.” Love and sensitivity were not necessarily communicated as independent constructs. Rather, the two often were intertwined.

### **Be Available to Those Who Desire Connection**

Throughout the interviews, the pastors spoke from what appeared to be a highly realistic perspective in terms of connecting with everyone in the congregation. In particular, they acknowledged that this is not realistically practical. Naturally, the larger the church, the more impossible it becomes to have meaningful relationships with every person in the congregation. The pastors related, with respect to this dynamic, that they

- a) try to give a meaningful touch to as many individuals as practical, and
- b) give due attention to those individuals who explicitly express a desire for it.

First, the pastors try to give significant acknowledgement to as many of their congregants as is feasible with the time available. For some, this involves visiting as many Sunday school classes as practical on a rotating basis. For other pastors, it involves writing notes of encouragement or sending cards. Yet others spoke of doing home visitation—attempting to be in as many homes as possible during a calendar year or biennium. The common point is that the pastors see the need to cast a wide net in extending themselves to the congregation. Evidently, people pick-up on the general spirit that the pastor attempts to relate to the congregation. Being seen or otherwise having a “presence” evidently helps to portray the notion of connection between pastors and the congregants.

Most of the pastors specifically mentioned being available before or after the services to congregants. This is said to make congregants feel as though the pastor is “being there.” Dashing back to one’s office after delivering a sermon at times could feel more psychologically soothing, but this is not the type of behavior that pastors in the study endorsed. Rather, pastors should be seen among the congregation during key times and people are said to respect the pastor for “being around.” Michael summarized the sentiments of most pastors on this point when he stated: “There is some value in shaking hands on Sunday. The greater value is ministering to someone who needed to talk to me after the service, so stand at the front and not at the side door.”

Second, pastoral availability was noted in terms of giving due attention to those individuals who explicitly express a desire for it. For example, some congregants have extenuating circumstances at times and pastors have a special obligation to give extra attention during these occasions. Weddings, funerals, and hospital stays serve as examples of times when people often require attention beyond the norm. Failure to exercise added devotion during such instances can result in the pastor being viewed as aloof or distant. In other words, giving special attention during certain time frames may not necessarily result in the pastor being portrayed as sensitive; but failure to give due focus may result in negative perceptions.

Beyond the more traditional episodes (as noted in the illustrations above), some congregants are more generally needy of pastoral attention than are others. For some individuals, simply shaking the pastor’s hand with a smile or general greeting suffices each week. However, others have deeper or more extended perceived needs for pastoral attention. The pastors in the study related that they try to show apt sensitivity to noticing these individuals and providing the extra support (as realistically feasible). For example, Jim related:



Deliberately, I walk slow. On Sundays the church members are my focus. I give 100% of attention to whoever I'm talking to. I try to never look over their shoulder at the next person in line. Listening to what is going on in their lives is very important.

Pastor Jim, like most other interviewees in our study has come to view an individual-touch as being a critical element in achieving overall pastoral leadership success.

Most of the pastors spoke in terms of helping congregants feel that, if a special need arises, then the pastor would be available to spend needed, extra time with them. Evidently, this was not an explicit statement that the pastors routinely state to the congregation. Rather, the pastors spoke in terms of more tacitly communicating the idea to people in how the pastors interact with congregants. Timothy illustrated this notion in the following manner: "Before and after the service, I hang out. People can come up and speak with me. When a lot of people are around, waiting to speak, I try to be careful and look the person in the eye and shake their hand." This type of weekly routine is said to communicate to congregants that the pastor is both approachable and available to them. Even though the individual does not have a current need for extra attention—the pastor is thought to be willing to make such time available—if he/she desired it at some point. One pastor related that "trust and integrity" is communicated over time in this way and another stated: "It's kind of like fellowship...people trust you, they follow you and they feel and experience the shepherd part of your role." Tom summarized this point most aptly when he said: "Most people need to know that they can meet with me. They feel like they can have access, if they need it."

While the theme of being available to those who desire special connection was very evident throughout the transcripts, the theme also included a general caveat related by the pastors. Namely, the study's participants also indicated the need to establish what are considered to be some protective boundaries. In some cases, this involved literal—physical boundaries, such as not meeting with women alone in the office or not hugging women congregants. Connection was said to be important but not without some parameters. In other instances, the boundaries were described as protecting reasonable family time or not allowing certain congregants to "suck me dry," as one particular pastor stated the matter. Generally, pastors were said to view their roles as showing availability to congregants as Caleb stated forthrightly: "I am always available for drop-ins, calls, visits, and I call back within 24 hours for all e-mails and phone calls." However, this availability comes with some reasonable limitations. The pastor's responsibilities obviously involves more than communicating with congregants. Keith illustrated: "I can't be all things to all people, so I have to say no, refer people to others, set boundaries because...I can't meet everyone's needs. I have to limit my time with people or I won't get the main things done."

### **Give Particular Attention to Connections with Lay Church Leaders**

The pastors in the study resounded that leadership development is essential in making connections with church congregants. As such, certain individuals in the church end up receiving a disproportionate amount of time and attention. Additionally, relationships often develop with these individuals in ways that are qualitatively deeper and richer than they are with an "average" congregant. In the Southern Baptist church milieu, these individuals served in roles such as deacons, Sunday school directors, church education leaders, youth leaders, worship directors, and the like.

The particular attention devoted to lay leaders was described in terms of being good for the overall ministry of the church. Leaders eventually will impact those whom they served in church contexts. In this sense, the pastoral investments spend in the lives of leaders resulted

in a “trickledown effect” to the entire congregation. Alex stated the principle as follows: “I specifically develop connections with leaders in order to multiply my leadership.” Bible principles, such as 2 Timothy 2:2 were sometimes cited in support of this protocol (“And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”).

The extra attention and connection with leadership was said to be mostly initiated by the pastors to the leaders, rather than by the lay leadership to the pastors. The pastors viewed the need to spend extra time with leaders in terms of “equipping” them to be more effective in their respective ministries. By so doing, the pastoral impact will be greater than if the pastors attempted to spend the same time with non-leaders. Brad illustrated the point of developing special connections with church leaders in the following manner: “The leaders will convince others below them, if and only if, I am close to them and know the leaders and personally motivate them.”

Most pastors related their commitment to spending time with church leaders as helping them to stay focused on what they consider to be the “big picture” of ministry. Since the pastoral role typically involves multiple responsibilities, investing time into the lives and situations of the leaders, was said to aid the pastors in not becoming bogged in the minute aspects of ministry to the neglect of the more weighty matters. Most participants related that the temptation of focusing on the details, rather than the bigger ministry picture, can be a strong pull. The details can be viewed, at times, as a series of continual crises that end up consuming the pastor’s week. Dedicated time with the church lay leaders was said to help the ministers keep the proper perspective and focus.

And finally, the pastors generally spoke of developing special connections with leaders in terms of “time investment.” Conceptually, expenditures and investments are both related and different. They share the common property of consumption. They also differ, however, in that the latter eventually reaps dividends. In the context of the pastoral interviews, participants described developing relationships with leaders as time expended that later would [hopefully and eventually] reap added returns. They become “better leaders” through the enhanced connections and active leadership development. One particular pastor used the word picture of a coach when describing the salience of developing special connections with lay leaders: “My effectiveness as head coach is dependent on the effectiveness of my other coaches.” Rick stated the same concept in terms of his personal ministry philosophy in this regard:

Small group leaders are the pastors to their small groups. Part of my ministry mission statement is that I will strive with skillful hands to build and equip leaders to accomplish the great commission. If I disappear, the work still continues through the leaders.

In sum, the pastors in our study frame their success as leaders not only in terms of what they accomplish in individuals’ lives—but how the process continues to spread as a result of their deliberate efforts. Investing their own lives into the lives of their congregants was said to be a key element that contributes to effective pastoral leadership.

## **Discussion**

Although Miller’s (1976) relational cultural theory classically has feminist moorings in the context of therapy, the paradigm has been aptly applied to multiple leadership contexts (e.g., Fletcher, 2012) and we believe it offers potential relevancy as an interpretive grid for the present study. Miller posited that relationship development empowers individuals

- a) through a sense of healthiness when they connect to others,
- b) motivating them toward prosocial action,
- c) enhances self-awareness,
- d) increases self-worth, and
- e) fosters continued connectedness with others.

When relationship development is poor, then essentially people experience opposite effects from the ones just identified. Blustein (2011) suggests that interpersonal relations are a powerful dynamic that, when harnessed effectively by leaders, can produce behavioral and attitudinal results in others—that otherwise would not be possible—using other motivational means, such as exhortation or verbal speeches. It is the exchange of one's life with another's person's life that is said to unleash cogent motivations and leaders would do well to take deliberate steps in harnessing the effects of this dynamic. Data from the present study suggests that these pastors experience their role as one in which they believe such interpersonal connections can make a qualitative difference in the lives of congregants.

Continued spiritual development is the ultimate objective of clergy for the lives of their respective parishioners. Relational cultural theory suggests that the inter-exchange between individuals fosters growth along multiple life dimensions. Smith (2012) notes that such development typically results from multiple factors and in a variety of modalities. Results from the present study show clergy to believe that their time and energy investments make marked contributions in lives of general congregants as well as the leaders. As pastors make daily and weekly ordinal decisions regarding how best to spend their time, individual connections are described in terms that convey more of investment rather than expenditure (i.e., the efforts are said to yield tangible returns).

While principles derived from research on leadership in the social sector have not typically applied in the realm of secular business leadership in the past, the secular business marketplace has undergone significant changes with the recent advent of *telecommuting*. The extant corpus of literature in leadership and management addresses a traditional work-environment in which employees and management operate in physical proximity during a structured workweek. Historically, managers could easily schedule staff meetings and conduct impromptu interactions with workers. Face-to-face communication (with its inherent body-language and non-verbal communication) has been the assumed context for exercising leadership in business. Telecommuting has altered those dynamics, creating serious challenges to which HR and management must adapt to succeed in this new, dispersed work environment. Those challenges center around the management of *relational nearness* (Lund, Manyika, & Ramaswamy, 2012). The new thread of research literature in this field identifying “physical distance” and “telecommuting” also reflects this new reality.

Pastoral leaders, on the other hand, have always exercised their ecclesiastical leadership in the context of remote followers who meet only weekly (or less). According to Howell, Neufeld, and Avolio (2005), this phenomenon is now becoming more common in mainstream business. McKinsey Global Institute (2012) reported that 25% of present U.S. jobs could be performed remotely, and businesses are widely planning to move in that direction in the future.

The three results of this study possess parallels to the management of remote workers in a business environment. For example, being intentional regarding pastoral connectedness is paralleled in the finding that telecommuters' attitude and productivity were directly correlated to social interaction with managers (Neufeld & Fang, 2005). The result of being available to those who desire connection is paralleled in the concern that, “while some people thrive in independent, remote work environments, others wither in the absence of daily contact...” (Lund et al., 2012). And giving particular attention to connections with lay leaders is paralleled

in the finding that business unit performance tends to be significantly affected by interaction frequency between senior managers and their remote subordinate branch managers in a large-scale study of a Canadian financial services institution (Howell, Neufeld, & Avolio, 2005). The point here is that the dynamics we found in operation regarding pastoral ministry may, indeed, extend beyond clergy responsibilities and actually be part of larger, more global leadership dynamics. While pastoral ministry possesses many unique features, it also shares some common features with all types of leadership roles—including those in the corporate community.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

An essential component of all good research studies is to identify the study's most salient limitations and to address them (Murnan & Price, 2004). In that vein, we identify four confines of the present study. One is that all interviews were conducted via telephone. While experts have acknowledged this as an acceptable means of conducting qualitative studies (Hurworth, 2005), it also has significant drawbacks. The nuances are lost anytime interviews are conducted in a manner other than face-to-face. The facial expressions, non-verbal emphases, and negative feedback (e.g., eye rolling, sighing, tapping) are missed with telephone interviews. Consequently, it is possible that our data set lacks some important elements or we failed to capture some key dynamics related to the study's results.

Second, there was an over-representation of Caucasians in the present study. To be clear, no minorities were removed from the sample. Rather, the paucity of minorities in the sample seems to be a reflection of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the sample's larger population. Further studies that include significant numbers of minorities would be an apt follow-up to the present project. Additionally, a qualitative study of all-minority pastors would be interesting to compare to the results of the present study. It is unknown whether minorities have share similar sentiments as Caucasian pastors or whether substantial differences exist.

Third, as noted above, the sample was selected from SBC pastors. Future studies should replicate the present one, using samples from other denominations. Groups with national governance, such as national headquarters that assign pastors to church locales, may hold potentially different insights from SBC pastors, where every congregation holds independent autonomy. Qualitative differences among denominations in multiple domains could prove insightful (Wiersma, 2007), including the present one. Also, because many SBC pastors share similar seminary training, future studies in this line should expand the sample to pastors who have received a breadth of seminary education (e.g., inter-denominational training). As previously noted, the pastors in the present study were all male, since the sample represented general, current SBC ordination policies.

And finally, the participants who were interviewed for the present study represent a self-selected group of pastors. In particular of the 37 pastors who originally were identified as exemplars of the total sample, only 13 agreed to engage in in-depth interviews for the present study. Consequently, nothing qualitative is known about the 24 pastors who chose not to participate in the study. This dynamic is common, not only in qualitative research studies, but also quantitative, and such limitations should be acknowledged (Sing & Richards, 2003). All were informed that the data would be used in order to complete an Ed.D. degree at one of the SBC seminaries. Consequently, it is possible that there may have been some type of systematic self-selection bias operated as some pastors chose to participate in the qualitative study and others only completed the survey that was administered—but not to participate in the qualitative component of the study (Stoop, 2004). Future studies should attempt to increase participant rates, so that all exemplars are represented in the final sample. Incentives

sometimes introduce their set of biases (Storms & Loosveldt, 2004), but consideration should be given to the potential costs/benefits trade-off in this regard.

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### Author Note

Dr. Jonathan W. Young and his wife Sarah have served at Dayton Avenue Baptist Church since September 2005. He brings a broad perspective to his leadership from career experiences as a computer programmer, a public school educator, a college instructor, and from a variety of prior ministry roles. Dr. Young graduated from the State University of New York at Binghamton, with a BS and MS in Computer Science; from Baptist Bible Seminary of Clarks Summit, PA, with a Masters of Divinity, and also holds a Doctorate of Education in Leadership from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to Dr. Jonathan W. Young, Email: [pj@daytonave.org](mailto:pj@daytonave.org)

Dr. Michael W. Firmin has served as a full-time psychology faculty member since 1988. He serves as Editor for the *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research (JEQR)* and directs the Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference (EQRC), now in its 25th year. Dr. Firmin has published over 80 articles in peer-reviewed journals and has presented over 150 papers in national, juried research conferences. He has a part-time private practice in forensic and clinical psychology. Dr. Firmin is an award-winning classroom instructor, serves

as a peer-reviewer for accreditation site team visits for North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission, and has served as interim pastor for a number of churches. He holds the following degrees: Ph.D. in Counselor Education, Syracuse University; Ph.D. in Church Administration, Bob Jones University; M.A. in Clinical Psychology, Marywood University; M.S. in Personnel Services, Bob Jones University; M.A. in Biblical Studies, Calvary Theological Seminary. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Dr. Michael W. Firmin, Email: [firmin@cedarville.edu](mailto:firmin@cedarville.edu)

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### **Article Citation**

Young, J. W., & Firmin, M. W. (2014). Qualitative perspectives toward relational connection in pastoral ministry. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(93), 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/young93.pdf>

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